

23 May 1987

Dr. Marshall W. Nirenberg
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Bethesda, MD 20014

Dear Dr. Nirenberg:

I, a retired physicist, am writing this letter to all American Nobel Laureates in physics, chemistry and physiology or medicine whose addresses I could find, to convey my strong conviction that we must now begin an active campaign to counteract popular belief in supernatural power.

Fundamentalist religions may have served some useful purposes in the past, and still continue to do so in certain limited areas. On balance, however, I believe they are now becoming a major impediment to the progress of the human species toward a world that is relatively free from military conflicts and in which political, social, economic and environmental problems can be investigated and solutions proposed and tested in a rational manner.

We find today in the United States, in a society that is scientifically and economically advanced, a strong resurgence of religious fundamentalism. The advocates of this movement are becoming ever more powerful politically and their voices reach a friendly ear in the White House. They cry out for such measures as the legalization of prayers in the public schools and for the teaching of "creation science" on an equal basis with evolution. Recently a federal judge in Alabama ruled that textbooks which cover rational approaches to social or moral problems were advocating the particular "religion" of secular humanism, and are therefore unconstitutional. Fundamentalists claim that the "absolute truths" regarding such matters are revealed in religious dogma.

What all this is leading up to is very frightening. Why bother to make arms limitation agreements with the Soviets, to protect the environment, or to pursue vigorously physical, chemical or biomedical research? Since the apocalyptic destruction of the world is coming soon anyway, the only truly meaningful activity is the seeking of personal salvation.

My suggestion for an initial step to counteract this growing mania is for you, as a Nobel Laureate, to make some kind of public statement regarding the incompatibility between natural law as discovered by application of the scientific method, and the existence of supernatural power. Since the general public understandably has a great respect for Nobel Laureates, such a statement should help considerably to halt the current spread of religious fanaticism.

I would appreciate receiving your comments regarding the above suggestion, or any other ideas for a course of action that you feel might be more appropriate and effective. We must do something; we cannot let human civilization, which has shown such great strides in the last two centuries mainly because of scientific progress, go down by default.

Sincerely,



Dr. Ralph Simon
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